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SEPTEMBER, 1918

THE EMPIRE OF CHINA IS CRUMBLING
DOWN

Dedicated to William Rose Benét

I

NOW let the generations pass—
Like sand through Heaven's blue hour-glass.

By the capital where poetry began,
Near the only printing presses known to man,
Young Confucius walks the shore
On a sorrowful day.
The town, all books, is tumbling down
Through the blue bay.
From rusty musty walls the bookworms come;
They drown themselves like rabbits in the sea.
Venomous scholars harry mandarins
With pitchfork, blunderbuss and snickersnee.

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

In the book-slums there is thunder ;
Gunpowder, that sad wonder,
Intoxicates the knights and beggar-men.
The old grotesques of war begin again :
Devils, furies, fairies are set free.

Confucius hears a carol and a hum :
A picture sea-child whirls from off his fan
In one quick breath of peach-bloom fantasy,
And in an instant bows the reverent knee—
A full-grown sweetheart, chanting his renown.
And then she darts into the Yellow Sea,
Calling, calling :
"Sage with holy brow,
Say farewell to China now ;
Live like the swine,
Leave off your scholar-gown !
This city of books is falling, falling,
The Empire of China is crumbling down."

II

*Confucius, Confucius, how great was Confucius—
The sunrise of Lu, and the master of Mencius?*

Alexander fights the East.
Just as the Indus turns him back
He hears of swarming lands beyond,
And sword-swept cities on the rack

Vachel Lindsay

With crowns outshining India's crown :
The Empire of China, crumbling down.
Later the Roman sibyls say :
"Egypt, Persia and Macedon,
Tyre and Carthage, passed away ;
And the Empire of China is crumbling down.
Rome will never crumble down."

III

*See how the generations pass—
Like sand through Heaven's blue hour-glass.*

Arthur waits on the British shore
One thankful day,
For Galahad sails back at last
To Camelot Bay.
The pure knight lands and tells the tale :
"Far in the east
A sea-girl led us to a king,
The king to a feast,
In a land where poppies bloom for miles,
Where books are made like bricks and tiles.
I taught that king to love your name—
Brother and Christian he became.

"His Town of Thunder-Powder keeps
A giant hound that never sleeps,
A crocodile that sits and weeps.

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

"His Town of Cheese the mouse affrights
With fire-winged cats that light the nights.
They glorify the land of rust;
Their sneeze is music in the dust.

"All towns have one same miracle
With the Town of Silk, the capital—
Vast book-worms in the book-built walls.
Their creeping shakes the silver halls;
They look like cables, and they seem
Like writhing roots on trees of dream.
Their sticky cobwebs cross the street,
Catching scholars by the feet,
Who own the tribes, yet rule them not,
Bitten by book-worms till they rot.
Beggars and clowns rebel in might
Bitten by book-worms till they fight."

Arthur calls his knights in rows:
"I will go if Merlin goes;
These rebels must be flayed and sliced—
Let us cut their throats for Christ."
But Merlin whispers in his beard:
"China has witchcraft to be feared."

Arthur stares at the sea-foam's rim
Amazed. The fan-girl beckons him!—
Her witch-ways all his senses drown.

Vachel Lindsay

She laughs in her-wing, like the sleeve of a gown.
She lifts a key of crimson stone:
"The Great Gunpowder-town you own."
She lifts a key with chains and rings:
"I give the town where cats have wings."
She lifts a key as white as milk:
"This unlocks the Town of Silk"—
Throws forty keys at Arthur's feet:
"These unlock the land complete."

Then, frightened by suspicious knights,
And Merlin's eyes like altar-lights,
And the Christian towers of Arthur's town,
She spreads blue fins—she whirs away;
Fleeing far across the bay,
Wailing through the gorgeous day:
"My sick king begs you save his crown
And his learned chiefs from the worm and clown—
The Empire of China is crumbling down."

IV

*Always the generations pass,
Like sand through Heaven's blue hour-glass!*

The time the King of Rome is born—
Napoleon's son, that eaglet thing—
Bonaparte finds beside his throne
One evening, laughing in her wing,

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

A Chinese sea-child ; and she cries,
Breaking his heart with emerald eyes
And fairy-bred unearthly grace :
"Master, take your destined place—
Across white foam and water blue
The streets of China call to you :
The Empire of China is crumbling down."
Then he bends to kiss her mouth,
And gets but incense, dust and drouth.

In Tokio they cry : "O King,
China's way is a shameful thing."
In hard Berlin they cry : "O King,
China's way is a shameful thing."
And thus our song might call the roll
Of every land from pole to pole,
And every rumor known to time
Of China doddering—or sublime.

v

*Slowly the generations pass—
Like sand through Heaven's blue hour-glass.*

But let us find tomorrow now :
Our towns are gone ;
Our books have passed ; ten thousand years
Have thundered on.
The Sphinx looks far across the world

Vachel Lindsay

In fury black:
She sees all western nations spent
Or on the rack.
Eastward she sees one land she knew
When from the stone
Priests of the sunrise carved her out
And left her lone.
She sees the shore Confucius walked
On his sorrowful day:
Learnèd paupers riot yet
In the ancient way;
Officials, futile as of old,
Have gowns more bright;
Bookworms are fiercer than of old,
Their skins more white;
Dust is deeper than of old;
More bats are flying;
More songs are written than of old—
More songs are dying.

Where Galahad found forty towns
Now fade and glare
Ten thousand towns with book-tiled roof
And garden-stair,
Where beggars' babies come like showers
Of classic words:
They rule the world—immortal brooks
And magic birds.

POETRY: *A Magazine of Verse*

The lion Sphinx roars at the sun:
"I hate this nursing you have done!
The meek inherit the earth too long—
When will the world belong to the strong?"
She soars; she claws his patient face—
The girl-moon screams at the disgrace.
The sun's blood fills the western sky;
He hurries not, and will not die.

The baffled Sphinx, on granite wings,
Turns now to where young China sings.
One thousand of ten thousand towns
Go down before her silent wrath;
Yet even lion-gods may faint
And die upon their brilliant path.
She sees the Chinese children romp
In dust that she must breathe and eat.
Her tongue is reddened by its lye;
She craves its grit, its cold and heat.
The Dust of Ages holds a glint
Of fire from the foundation-stones,
Of spangles from the sun's bright face,
Of sapphires from earth's marrow-bones.
Mad-drunk with it, she ends her day—
Slips when a high sea-wall gives way,
Drowns in the cold Confucian sea
Where the whirring fan-girl first flew free.

Vachel Lindsay

*In the light of the maxims of Chesterfield, Mencius,
Franklin or Nietzsche, how great was Confucius?*

His fan's gay daughter, crowned with sand,
Between the water and the land
Now cries on high in irony,
With a voice of night-wind alchemy:
"O drownèd cat,
O stony-face,
The joke is on Egyptian pride,
The joke is on the human race:
'The meek inherit the earth too long—
When will the world belong to the strong?'
I am born from off the holy fan
Of the world's most civil gentleman.
So answer me,
O deathless sea!"

And thus will the answering Ocean call:
"China will fall,
The Empire of China will crumble down,
When the Alps and the Andes crumble down;
When the sun and the moon have crumbled down,
The Empire of China will crumble down,
Crumble down."

Vachel Lindsay